



ੴ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ ॥



The Sikhs And The British  
1849-1920

Dr. Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon

Guru Nanak Dev Mission Series—401 & 402  
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### **Preface**

In this article Dr. G. S. Dhillon has dealt with a subject in respect of which different views have appeared in books and he has, with reference to the historical facts, dispelled the wrong notions of some of the authors regarding British attitude towards Sikhs. It is a purely objective study based on facts and figures, as a research scholar of history. There are large number of subjects which require in depth study by the scholars and that such publications are greatly useful and beneficial for correcting the fallacies prevalent due to lack of proper facts.

Guru Nanak Dev Mission is grateful to Dr. Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon for writing on this subject and allowing the Mission to publish the same. Mission also thank Gain Singh for his help in publishing this book.

Guru Nanak Dev Mission  
Patiala

## THE SIKHS AND THE BRITISH —1849-1920

Recently many scholars, especially in the West, have contended that the assertion of a distinct Sikh identity in the mid-nineteenth century was very largely due to advertent support extended by the British. W. H. McLeod holds that "there were several Sikh identities available during the period immediately following the 1849 annexation and one such identity (the militant Khalsa version) was vigorously promoted by the British in order to serve their own military purposes. The same identity was accepted by the stronger<sup>1</sup> of the Singh Sabha leaders and became the focus of their reforming activities late in the nineteenth century."<sup>2</sup> Richard Fox refers to the Sikhs in the Indian army "transmuted into Singhs by the British."<sup>3</sup> Scholars like N.G. Barrier and Rajiv Kapur have also referred to the recruiting and organisational policy of the British Indian army as the major instrument for fostering the distinct Sikh identity. Rajiv Kapur observes: "Recruitment into the army provided strong encouragement for the development and maintenance of a separate Sikh identity."<sup>4</sup> Barrier<sup>5</sup> and Fox<sup>6</sup> both find themselves caught in an intricate and incoherent analysis of the British motives in dealing with the Sikhs.

**The Relevant Questions are :** Did not the Sikh leaders invoke the Sikh doctrine in the Guru Granth ? Was it not inevitable for a Sikh movement, aimed at restoring the purity of Sikhism, to remove outside accretions, including Hindu influence and make the Sikh stand on their own ground unencumbered ? Was it not necessary for the Sikhs to go through a discipline of education in order to equip themselves for participation in the political life ? Is it right to brand the Singh Sabha leaders as loyalists and accuse them of misguiding the community to serve the ends of the British in India ? Did not the Sikhs have to wage a long battle to maintain their religious

institutions and practices and free their Gurdwaras from the control of the Mahants and Pujaris, who enjoyed the patronage and backing of the British? Is it right or misleading for the historians to talk of the rôle of the British military policy in promoting the Sikh identity and to make a complete black out of the Sikh ideology and four hundred years of the Guru period and Sikh history? How can they turn a blind eye to the patronage extended by the British to the Mahants (priests) at the Sikh temples who, because of their background, opposed the Sikh identity tooth and nail?

In deriving some of their hasty and ill-conceived inferences, the writers fail to study the subject methodically and to see the Singh Sabha Movement and its work in the background of (a) the Sikh ideology, (b) the method and history of the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh movement in the preceding three hundred and fifty years and (c) the general and overall historical perspective of ideological movements during their lean periods. Therefore, in order to make a comprehensive and methodical study of the subject, we shall divide it under the following heads: (i) the Sikh ideology, (ii) the preparatory period of educating and motivating the masses, (iii) reviving institutions and centres of the faith to re-build the Panth and its distinct identity and the final stage of political preparation and struggle, (iv) realities of the situation after the annexation of Punjab and factors hostile to Sikh identity, (v) the Singh Sabha Movement and its plan of work, activities and achievements, (vi) the preparatory stage leading to the second stage of Gurdwara Reform Movement and participation in political struggle, (vii) general historical perspective and (viii) conclusion.

First of all we shall take up salient features of the Sikh religion, especially where Sikhism made a radical departure from the earlier religious traditions.

**Sikh Ideology:** Sikhism is a revelatory religion, which revolted against the religious hypocrisy of the Brahmins and the political oppression of the contemporary rulers. Guru Nanak,

the founder of the Sikh religion stressed the unity of God<sup>7</sup> and the brotherhood of man.<sup>8</sup> He attacked such pillars of the Hindu society as caste,<sup>9</sup> idolatry,<sup>10</sup> ritualism,<sup>11</sup> asceticism<sup>12</sup> and intermediary role of the priests<sup>13</sup> in man's relations with God. His spiritual thesis, with an inalienable social content, sought to establish equality not only between man and man but also between man and woman. He welded the spiritual and the temporal planes of human existence into a harmonious whole and brought about reconciliation between the religious and the secular means for achieving the best results in human affairs.<sup>14</sup> The Guru's followers were not required to chant Sanskrit Shalokas before stone idols but sang hymns composed by the Guru himself in their mother tongue. They came to have different places and modes of worship. It was not an easy task to confront the dogmatism of the priest-dominated and caste-ridden Hindu society. The Guru brought about a far-reaching transformation in the minds of the people through the institutions of Shabad, Sangat, Pangat, Guru-Ka-Langar, Guru and Dharam-shal. The three cardinal principles of Guru's teachings were: 'Kirt Karo' (earn your bread though hard labour), 'Vand Chakko' (share your earnings with others) and 'Naam Japo' (always remember God). This resulted in building a separate and self-reliant community with new beliefs and institutions.

The process of separation was carried forward by the second Sikh Guru Angad. He introduced the Gurmukhi script, in which he compiled Guru Nanak's and his own compositions. The Guru was opposed to mendicancy and parasitical living. He earned his own living by twisting coarse grass strings used for cots. The third Guru Amar Das took many steps which tended to break further the affiliations of the Sikhs with the Hindus. He introduced new forms of ceremonials for birth, death and marriage. He deprecated the practice of 'Purdah' and 'Sati', encouraged inter-caste alliances and re-marriage of widows. He declared that the Sikhs who were active house-holders, were wholly separate from the passive and recluse 'Udasis' whom he excluded from the Sikh society. The Guru established

twenty two new centres or parishes (*Manjis*) for conveying the message of Guru Nanak to the people. The centres were supposed to cater both to the religious and the empirical needs of the people. Guru Ram Das, who succeeded him as the fourth Guru, acquired the site of the present city of Amritsar which became the religious capital of the Sikhs. He had a tank dug around which bazars or trading centres were established.

Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru, took some very important steps for fortifying the Sikh identity. He raised the Harmandir and gave to the Sikhs a central place and shrine of their own. This was to wean away Sikhs from Hindu institutions like those at Hardawar, Varanasi, etc. He also gave the Sikhs a scripture of their own in the form of Granth Sahib, which they could read and understand. They did not require the help of Brahmin priests to read out Sanskrit texts from the Vedas or the Upanishads, which they did not understand. It was Guru Arjan, who very clearly and emphatically declared that the Sikhs were an independent community :

“I do not keep the Hindu fast,  
nor the Muslim Ramadan,  
I serve Him alone who is my refuge,  
I serve the one Master who is also Allah,  
I have broken with the Hindu and the Muslim,  
I will not worship with the Hindu, nor like  
the Muslim go to Mecca,  
I shall serve Him and no other,  
I will not pray to idols nor say the Muslim prayer;  
I shall put my heart at the feet of the One  
Supreme Being;  
For we are neither Hindus nor Mussalmans”<sup>15</sup>

Guru made, for the principles of his religion, the Supreme sacrifice of his life and became the first martyr in Sikh history. Guru Arjan's son and successor Guru Hargobind started military preparations. His resort to arms was in keeping with the last instructions of his father. Guru Nanak too had rejected Ahimsa

as an inviolable religious doctrine. Facing the Harmandir, Guru Hargobind built the Akal Takhat, a seat of the temporal authority as distinct from Harmandir Sahib, clearly signifying that the Sikhs owed their primary allegiance to God. He also set up two flags fluttering before it as visible symbols of Miri and Piri, i.e. the temporal and the religious authorities. The concept of Miri and Piri was the natural and inevitable outcome of the doctrine of the combination of the spiritual and the empirical laid down by the first Guru. That this combination is fundamental to the Sikh doctrine is clear from the fact that in Sikhism the insignia for Piri or spiritualism is a sword and not a rosary. Many of the misunderstandings by scholars of Sikhism or its history are due to their failure to have an adequate knowledge of the Sikh ideology. This lack of knowledge or sometimes bias is quite apparent among scholars drawn from pacifist or dichotomous religions.

The ninth Sikh Guru Teg Bahadur suffered martyrdom to counter the forces of tyranny and injustice and to uphold the freedom of man to practice his religion. He demonstrated that to lay down one's life in defence of righteousness was a paramount religious duty. When a report was sent to Emperor Aurangzeb that the Guru was organising a people (*Millat*), he offered to the Guru that if he confined his activities to prayers and preachings, he would be given grants for the purpose, provided he gave up his political activities. But the Guru declined the offer.<sup>16</sup> The inspiration stemming from the creative vision of Guru Nanak reached its climax under the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh. The ideal of Saint-Soldier implicit in the Miri-Piri doctrine of Guru Nanak fructified in the creation of the Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh. It was the objective of the Sikh society or Khalsa to restore justice and harmony in the prevailing state of affairs. He created the Khalsa, a disciplined body of Sikhs, and conferred upon them a distinct look. He gave them a martial name 'Singh' (Lion) and prescribed five *kakars* including kirpan and unshorn hair. In fact, the rule about keeping unshorn hair started a debate and those wanting to shave

hair and to follow Hindu customs were automatically excluded from the Sikh society.<sup>17</sup> The symbols strengthened religious discipline, gave external uniformity to the Sikh faith and served as aids to the preservation of the corporate life of the community. It is very important that the egalitarian principle was an accepted and practiced norm of the Sikh society. It is noteworthy that four out of the five Piaras (Beloved ones), who offered their heads to the Guru and were baptised were Shudras. He intended to make a complete break with the past religious tradition through the introduction of Nash doctrine involving Kirtnash, Kulnash, Dharamnash, Bharamnash and Karamnash, i.e. the giving up of all those beliefs, ideologies and practices that came in the way of the sole worship of the One Supreme Being. The creation of the Khalsa was a unique phenomenon in the annals of mankind. It was the epitome of the Sikh movement. There is no evidence, whatsoever, to suggest that there was any other Sikh identity or society promoted by the Gurus or in existence in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The Guru raised the Indian spirit from servility, inferiority, fatalism and defeatism to the dynamic ideal of responsible reaction and resistance against tyranny and injustice. The supreme acts of martyrdom of the Guru, his father, mother and four sons for the cause of righteousness left an indelible stamp on the Sikh way of life. It is sheer idleness to think or suggest that the deep seated moral conditioning formed by the longest chain of martyrdoms could just be re-created or affected by any wishful self-interest of the British or any other ruler. Such artificial creations of religious identity are unknown to history.

During his life time Guru Gobind Singh chose Banda Singh Bahadur to conduct the final phase of the Sikh struggle against the Mughal Empire. It was under his leadership that the Khalsa armies won decisive victories and shook the very foundations of the mighty Mughal Empire. Banda struck coins in the name of the Khalsa Panth. The inscriptions on the coins are significant :

“This coin is struck as a token of our sovereignty here and here after. This divine bounty flows from the sword of Nanak

(Tegh-i-Nanak) and the victory and felicity is the gift of Guru Gobind Singh, the king of kings, the true Master."<sup>19</sup>

This coin itself clearly signifies that in the consciousness of the Sikhs of those times, there was a complete unity of spirit and ideology between the first and the last Gurus and in fact among all Gurus. It clearly shows that the concept about differences in the ideologies of the first and the tenth Master is a figment of later arm-chair or partisan writers unknown to the Sikhs or people of the earlier centuries. Banda Bahadur's seal also depicted similar thought i.e., "Degh—the kettle for service, Tegh, the strength of the sword arm, and Fateh, the resultant victory, received by Guru Gobind Singh from Guru Nanak."<sup>20</sup>

Under Banda's inspiration, Sikhism became popular with the people of Punjab. About one lac persons embraced Sikhism. Banda and several hundred soldiers of the Khalsa army who were arrested, kept their cool even in the face of death. None of them renounced his faith to save his life.<sup>21</sup> They carried on the glorious tradition of sacrifice and martyrdom for the cause of righteousness handed down to them by the Gurus. Their blood created fertile soil for sprouting the seeds of Sikh glory. The Sikhs confronted the hordes of Persian and Afghan invaders with the same religious spirit. This was a time when a price was put on every Sikh head and thrice it was reported to the authorities that the Sikhs had been exterminated root and branch.<sup>22</sup> The imperial order for the elimination of Sikhs was directed at the destruction of the Nanakpanthis.<sup>23</sup> It did not declare them as Sikhs or Singhs or the Khalsa. This clearly indicated that there was no question of any multiple identities among the Sikhs in the eighteenth century. The clear teachings of the ten Gurus and the fire of suffering and persecution had welded the Sikhs with a unity of ideals, ethos and practices entirely different from those of the Hindu society with which they were surrounded. The Bani and the Nash doctrine created the wall of division between them, and persecution and suffering cemented the internal cohesion of the community as a distinct society. There was only one community of Nanakpanthis, Sikhs or Khalsa whose sole founder was Guru Nanak. The definition



of a Sikh was very clear, without any scope for ambiguity. There was no question of any multiple identities among the Sikhs.

After a long period of turmoil, suffering and persecution, the Sikhs rose to political power under Ranjit Singh, who ruled under the banner of Sarkar-i-Khalsa. It was at this time that Hindus swelled the ranks of the Khalsa in the hope of temporal gains. The population of the Sikhs, which at one time was reported to be not more than twenty thousand in the 18th century now rose to the peak figure of 10-11 lacs in the times of Ranjit Singh.<sup>24</sup> It was not so easy for these converts of convenience to shed some of their beliefs and practices. Ranjit Singh had to spend most of his time in conquering and consolidating territories. The result was that the Sikhs had hardly any time to set their house in order. It is evident that the large scale increase in the Sikh population was due to the new entrants who had flocked to new faith not out of conviction but to put up an appearance of closer ties with the people in power.<sup>25</sup> There began a new phase of Sikhism with new entrants to the Sikh fold. Their ways and customs were still over-laid with Hinduism. It was very easy for them to slide back into their old faith when power did not rest with the community. This was the first time in their history that the Sikhs could be divided into two categories, the first consisting of those who nursed their traditional culture and carried in them the spirit to suffer and sacrifice for a righteous cause and the second comprising the new lot with hardly any strong commitment to the faith. During the Guru and the post-Guru period there is no evidence, whatsoever of the so called "multiple identities". During the phase of struggle and persecution in the 18th century, when to be a Sikh was to invite death, the Sikhs never had any ambiguity about their identity or ideals created by the ten Nanaks. And both for the insiders and outsiders there was a single community or society they had created. They kept the torch of Sikhism ablaze through tremendous suffering and sacrifice.

**Post-Annexation Period :-** With the fall of the Sikh kingdom, the new entrants to the Sikh fold started wavering in their loyalty

to Sikhism. The Sikhs had hardly had peace for one generation, some of these new entrants reverted to Hinduism and its old prejudices and practices.<sup>26</sup> Still there were many for whom the border line between Hinduism and Sikhism became very thin and vague and they kept unsurely on the border line between Sikhism and Hinduism. In their outlook, character and behaviour they stood clearly apart from the main segment of the Sikh society who had a clear identity. The latter traced their lineage from the Guru period and had inherited the glorious tradition of martyrdom for the cause of righteousness. With the emergence of the British as the new rulers, the relationship between Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs underwent a complete change. In Punjab the Hindus, who had looked upon the Sikhs as their protectors against the Muslims and were partners in power during the years of triumphs under Ranjit Singh, showed hardly any commitment towards Sikhism that had successfully fought battles for liberty and freedom of the land and its people. With both the Muslim threat and the Sikh kingdom gone, the external pressures that had held them seemingly close to Sikhism disappeared. They had to redefine their mutual relationship. Apart from this, the role of some members of the Hindu elites during the period of annexation, a point which we shall detail later on, was far from creditable and created some gap between the two communities. It is noteworthy that the Hindu Dogras and Purbias during the crucial Anglo-Sikh Wars deserted the Khalsa army. On the other hand, the Muslim part of the Khalsa army fought against the British till the end.<sup>27</sup> Tears at the defeat of Sarkar-i-Khalsa were shed by Shah Muhammad, the celebrated Muslim poet.

The British looked upon the Sikhs as enemies and initiated a policy aimed at the suppression of the 'War-like Sikhs', with the help of an army of occupation comprising 60,000 soldiers and a police force of 15,000, largely manned by the Punjabi Muslims.<sup>28</sup> Special precautions were taken in policing the Majha area, where Bhai Mehraj Singh and Narain Singh were reported to be active.<sup>29</sup> The royal house of the Sikhs was completely destroyed. It is well known that Maharani Jindan, called the "mother of the Khalsa",

whom the British considered to be the root cause of all trouble, was treated very shabbily and was forced to leave the country.<sup>30</sup> The minor Maharaja Dalip Singh was made to resign "for himself, his heirs and successors, all rights, title and claim to the sovereignty of the Punjab or to any sovereign power whatever".<sup>31</sup> The 'Koh-i-Noor', considered by Dalhousie as a historical emblem of conquest in India, was presented to the Queen of England.<sup>32</sup> The Government confiscated all the valuables, including the antiques of the Sikh Raj from the Toshakhana of the Maharaja and also the estates of all those chiefs who had fought against the British in the two Anglo-Sikh Wars.<sup>33</sup> Some of them were exiled from Punjab and others were kept under surveillance in their own houses. They were not allowed to keep arms in their possession.<sup>34</sup> Forts and defensive fortifications—practically every Sikh village had defensive bastions—were levelled. All military grants to the Sikh Jagirdars were abolished.<sup>35</sup> Henry Lawrence, as head of the Board of Control, responsible for the administration of Punjab, recommended slight leniency towards the Sikh nobility. He thought and argued that it was most impolitic and dangerous to deprive them of their rights unfairly. But, he was over ruled by Governor General Dalhousie, who in pursuance of his Imperialistic policies thought that the "Jagirdars deserved little but maintenance."<sup>36</sup> Henry Lawrence tendered his resignation over this issue.

Nearly 50,000 Sikh soldiers were disbanded.<sup>37</sup> Hardly a tenth of the old army of Punjab was taken into the British pay. Although the term 'Sikh' was used for the re-employed soldiers, few were in fact Sikhs. They were largely Punjabi Muslims, Gurkhas and Hindustanis of the Durbar army. The British officers looked upon the Sikh soldiers with suspicion. They were called, "dirty sepoys"<sup>38</sup> and many officers wished them to cut their hair "forgetting that the essence of Sikhism lies in its locks."<sup>39</sup> D. Petrie, an Assistant Director, Criminal Intelligence, Government of India, in a Confidential report on the 'Development of Sikh Politics (1900-1911)', wrote :

"The British adopted a very strict and rigid policy detrimental to the growth of Sikhism. After annexation, the Golden Temple

Amritsar, alongwith 6 other Gurdwaras and the Gurdwara at Tarn Taran were practically controlled by the British authorities through a Manager of these Gurdwaras appointed by the British Government. The Waqf Act of 1861 gave the control and Management of the holy places of the Hindus and Muslims to the communities concerned but in the case of the Sikh Gurdwaras, the Act was not applied on political grounds. The properties of places of worship were transferred and given over to the Udasi Mahants and others, throughout the Punjab.<sup>40</sup> A significant blow was given by the British to the Sikh religion when they conferred proprietary rights on the temple Mahants, Brahmans, Udasis or Nirmalas,<sup>41</sup> most of whom had Hindu leanings and hardly understood or had faith in the Sikh religion and its practices. This was an extremely subtle method by which the British sought to secure the undoing of the ideological base of the Sikhs. A committee of nine Sikhs with a Government nominated Sarbarah or Warden as its head was appointed. After 1883, however, the Committee was quietly dropped and the whole control came to be vested in the Sarbarah who received his instructions from the Deputy Commissioner.<sup>42</sup> The government wanted to maintain the Gurdwaras as channels of indirect control of Sikhs.

The British rule dealt a severe blow to the socio-economic condition of the Sikhs. Thousands of Sikh soldiers were rendered jobless. Because of earlier wars and consequent disturbances, the lot of the peasantry was no better. Instead of the Sikhs, Hindus were preferred in the civil services. Most of the jobs in military and police were given to the Punjabi Muslims. Out of the eleven Extra Assistant Commissioners, appointed by the Board of Control, only one was a Sikh.<sup>43</sup>

The Christian Missions which came to be established in Punjab, also generated a feeling of hatred and hostility towards the Sikhs. The Charter granted in 1600 by Queen Elizabeth of England to a Colonising Company spoke of "duties higher than those of Commerce."<sup>44</sup> If merchants must buy and sell, they must also convert. Religious imperialism was the first phase of British Colonial imperialism. Christian Missions worked under British

political wings. The Missionaries established their centres at Amritsar, Tarn Taran, Batala,<sup>45</sup> Ludhiana and Lahore,<sup>46</sup> all areas of dense Sikh population.<sup>47</sup> Many Sikh students studying in Missionary schools began to despise the religion of their forefathers.<sup>48</sup> Some of them cut their hair and beards. The conversions of Maharaja Dalip Singh and Raja Harnam Singh of Kapurthala were serious and deliberated blows at the roots of the community. Further, the growing success of Missionaries in their evangelical work, with the support of the Government, was an overt measure against the Sikhs. Sir John Lawrence used to make annual contribution of Rupees five hundred towards missionary activities.<sup>49</sup> Some of the Missionaries openly condemned the Sikh institutions, tradition and Gurus. They called the Guru Granth a "heathen scripture".<sup>50</sup> The Administrative Report (1849-51) noted : "The Sikh faith and ecclesiastical policy is rapidly going where Sikh political ascendancy has already gone... These men joined (Sikhism) in thousands and they now desert in equal numbers... The sacred tank of Amritsar is less thronged than formerly, and the attendance at annual festivals is diminishing yearly. Initiatory ceremony for adult persons is now rarely performed .. Gurmukhi is rapidly falling into desuetude. The Punjabi as a spoken language is also losing its currency and degenerating into a merely provincial and rustic dialect."<sup>51</sup> A series of discreditable manoeuvres, interference with the local customs, feverish activity of the Christian missions and the attempts to Westernise the Sikh culture filled the Sikhs with alarm.

**Sikhs and Mutiny :—**During the Mutiny of 1857, the Muslims sought the restoration of the rule of Muslim princes and rulers and the Hindus hoped to put the Maratha rulers back into power. The princes of the two communities had a unity of purpose in putting up a common front against a common enemy, the British. Because of the earlier British repression of the Sikhs, they were too disorganised to think of putting up a united leadership to reclaim their lost kingdom. The community was leaderless.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the situation in the Punjab was quite different from the one that prevailed in the rest of India. An important and the

main factor was that the Sikhs had nursed a serious grudge against the Purbias and the Dogras who, despite the Sikhs having never given them any cause for offence, had by their betrayal and other overt and covert acts, helped the British during the Anglo-Sikh Wars and later in the annexation of Punjab. The British used this Sikh grievance and consequent "natural hatred" towards the Purbias. Kavi Khazan Singh in his work, 'Jangnama Dilli', written in 1858 mentions that the Sikh participation against the Purbia soldiers was in reaction to their boast that they had vanquished the Sikhs in 1845-46 and in 1848-49.<sup>53</sup> Another contemporary observer noted : "The animosity between the Sikhs and the Poorbiahs is notorious. The former gave out that they would not allow the latter to pass through their country. It was, therefore determined to take advantage of this ill-feeling and to stimulate it by the offer of rewards for every Hindoostanee sepoy who should be captured."<sup>54</sup> The bitter memories of Purbia cooperation with the British were so fresh in the minds of the Sikhs that any coalition between the two became impossible. The people who now claimed to be fighters for freedom were the same who, eight years earlier, had actively helped the British to usurp Sikh sovereignty. The pleas of Purbias were so hollow and incongruous with their earlier conduct that they fell on deaf ears of the aggrieved Punjabi Sikhs and Muslims whose independence they had helped the British to rob. Besides it is a well accepted view that the risings in 1857 were just revolts by the princes to regain their feudal or territorial rights. It was far from being any ideological struggle, or for any common Indian interest. In this context, the Sikhs in the background of their rule in Punjab and egalitarian tradition could hardly be expected to side with Muslims and Hindu princes to regain their kingdoms, nor could religious taboos which affected Hindu and Muslim sentiments, against many of which the Sikh Gurus had led a crusade, could in any measure inflame Sikh sentiments. It was on account of all this that the Punjab was not affected by the rebellion which convulsed the rest of northern India. Punjabi Mussalmans turned a deaf ear to their Hindustani co-religionists' exhortation of 'jihad'

against the pig-eating despoilers of Islam. Punjabi Hindus and, with greater reason, the Sikhs refused to listen to the belated appeal to save Hindu Dharma from beef-eating foreigners who used cow to grease their cartridges."<sup>55</sup> However, there were stray cases of Sikhs joining the mutineers. It was reported that a large number of Sikhs gathered at Ropar and declared the Khalsa Raj for which the leader of the band was immediately put to death. A Sikh Chief Raja Nahar Singh was executed for supporting the cause of the rebels. After the annexation Bhai Maharaj Singh had moved from village to village in Majha region and incited the people to rebel.<sup>56</sup>

The Cis-Satluj chiefs of Patiala, Malerkotla, Kalsia, Nabha, Faridkot and Jind, alongwith their mercenary forces, rendered full help to the British in suppressing the rebellion. These chiefs owed their existence to the British and were always outside the main Punjab, being hostile to Ranjit Singh. They still remembered with gratitude the support extended to them by the British against Maharaja Ranjit Singh. But for the British protection, Ranjit Singh would have overpowered them long ago. The British had guaranteed them full protection ever since the proclamation of 1809 (Treaty of Amritsar). Very few scholars have studied the role of the Sikhs in the Mutiny in its true historical perspective. In the opinion of M.A. Rahim : "Disarmament of people, dismantling of fortifications, disbanding of the Khalsa Army, suppression of the Sikh gentry, stationing of a large army and police in the Punjab and various other measures were taken to cow down the brave militant and turbulent Khalsa nation into humble submission.....so that the Khalsa may not be allowed to recover its prestige and reconstitute its army."<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Evans Bell believes that the Khalsa was bound to feel discomfited for their Gurus had been discredited and their union had been dissolved.<sup>58</sup>

Although the Mutiny did not spread to Punjab, the British did not look upon the Sikhs as trustworthy. They knew that Punjab was still seething with disaffection. Therefore, they kept a strict vigil over their fallen enemies. A big force consisting of

60,000 soldiers and 15,000 police personnel was stationed in Punjab to exercise control in the event of an emergency. There was one soldier for every forty persons. Thus, peace in Punjab was preserved at the point of bayonet. A Government report of this time noted: "A spirit of nationality and military ambition still survives in the minds and hearts of thousands among Sikhs. It was vain to suppose that thoughts of future triumphs and future independence did not cross the imagination of these people or that aspirations of restoring the Khalsa Raj were not excited during the summer of 1857. Universal revolt in the Punjab would have broken out if Delhi had not fallen soon into our hands."<sup>59</sup> Despite recruitment from Punjab during and after the revolt, the total number of Sikh soldiers by May 1858 stood at 13,344 as against 20,027 Mohammedans.<sup>60</sup>

As detailed above, it is evident that the Sikh soldiers who had joined the British army in 1857 were, by and large, drawn from the Cis-Satluj states, whose rulers during Ranjit Singh's rule owed their very existence to British bayonets and who even during the Anglo-Sikh Wars were obviously sympathetic to the British and not to the Sikhs. In fact, the Sikhs of Punjab were virtually segregated from the rest of India by the intervening Cis-Satluj states and the adjacent Hill and Dogra rulers, who had been traditionally pro-Delhi. So far as the Hill-Rajus were concerned their hostility towards the Gurus and the Sikhs dated from the Mughal period.

**British Policy after Mutiny :-** With the transfer of authority from the East India Company to the Crown, it had become the declared policy of the British to give due respect to the religious sensibilities of each community, to raise army regiments on communal lines and to ensure that every community, and not the Sikh community alone, observed its separate religious discipline. The immediate cause leading to the Mutiny had been the greased cartridges smeared with the fat of cows and swines. This had outraged the feelings of both Hindus, to whom the cow was sacred, and Muslims for whom the swine was unclean. The British



Government had learnt a good lesson, and its policy, in reference to the Indian religions, was radically altered. While deciding to raise regiments on communal lines, the British also kept, in view the prejudice of the caste Hindus, especially in matters pertaining to eating from a common mess and living together under the same roof in the military barracks. Government not only maintained the religious identity of the units but also respected the religious taboos of the soldiers, and even allowed each Brahmin to cook his food separately.<sup>61</sup>

In the new native army the number of high castes was reduced. A soldier in each regiment was required to take oath of allegiance on his respective scripture by the help of his own priest at his own place of worship. Soldiers were allowed to use their own communal war-cries. This new policy was in no way designed to further one religion at the cost of the other. A notable decision was taken to reduce the number of native sepoys in the Indian army and to increase the strength of the European soldiers. There was an overall decrease of 40 per cent in the total strength of the native soldiers but an increase of 60 per cent in the number of European troops. It was an established principle of the British policy for the period since 1858 that the native troops should not exceed more than 40 per cent of total army.

Many scholars like Fox, McLeod, Rajiv Kapur and Barrier have wrongly highlighted the recruiting policy of the British in maintaining religious neutrality and freedom, as if this policy had only related to the Sikhs. Actually as we have stated, it was a general policy regarding the maintenance of religious neutrality and status quo concerning each community. It is, therefore, incorrect that the British policy either in any manner related only to the Sikhs, or that it had introduced any religious practice that had not been in existence earlier in the 18th and 19th centuries. It is, therefore, an idle prejudice to suggest that the British chose any particular or the Khalsa identity. In relation to every community the British accepted what was the authentic and the typical. In fact, any partiality or prejudice in the choice of any sect would

unnecessarily have raised criticism, which the British wanted to avoid, being contrary to their new religious policy of neutrality. Here it is relevant to give the statement of Henry Lawrence quoted by Barrier in his article, 'The Punjab Government and Communal Politics, 1870-1908': "My men are expected to extend equal rights to all native religious and to align with none."<sup>62</sup> On the basis of the above statement and other facts Barrier concludes that "the first Punjab administration thus responded to a communal problem with religious impartiality."<sup>63</sup>

In fact the burden of his entire article is to suggest British neutrality towards different religious communities in Punjab and defend them against the charge of creating communal divisions. It is difficult to understand what climatic change has occurred or interests have over-weighed with the same author that later he writes that, "the British also played an important role by supporting the maintenance of separate Sikh identity for military purposes."<sup>64</sup> Because it is normally unusual for an author to give on the one hand a clean chit to the British for their avowed and practical neutrality towards the three communities in Punjab, and, on the other hand, strongly to endorse the oft-repeated charge of Hindu politicians that the Hindu-Sikh divide in Punjab is a British creation to serve their partisan interests. Besides, this religious policy regarding various communities had been formulated by the British long before the publication of pamphlets by the Singh Sabha at the fag end of the 19th century. Here it is very important to mention that the British religious policies regarding communal practices in the army were strictly governed by their own self-interests, so as to maintain the loyalty of the soldiers. The important and authentic fact is that both for the Muslim rulers of the 19th century, there was only one reality or identity, namely, the Sikhs, Nanakpanthis or Khalsa with which they battled or dealt with. Any other identity existed neither in the field of religion, society, politics nor even in fiction or imagination. The religious realities the British found, were dealt with uniformly by their religious policy of self-interest; they did not choose any one, ignore any one, or promote any one. It is only the split vision of

some interested modern writers that raises the phantoms of plural images that for the rulers and historians of the times were non-existent.

But the British knew full well that the centres of Sikh strength and inspiration were their scripture, ideology and Gurdwaras. In fact, the British were very vigilant and particular in ensuring that the Sikh Gurdwaras were kept in the hands of the Hindu Mahants and Pujaris so that the Sikhs who were traditionally known to draw their religious vigour, vitality and inspiration from their ideology and holy places, some of which associated with the martyrdoms and struggles of the Gurus against the rulers, were, through the Government policy and their appointed managers, segregated from their glorious tradition and corrupted ideologically.

Recruitment to the army was made, keeping in view, the qualities of fine physique and a military background and tradition. The British, no doubt, had preference for martial races but the Sikhs were not the only martial race recruited in the Indian army. There were many Muslim tribes and Hindu castes like the Pathans and Dogra Rajputs with martial traditions, who provided good recruiting grounds for the British. This is amply borne out by a contemporary report in the Army Book:

"At present the Sikhs, together with the other inhabitants of the Punjab, whether Hindu, as the Dogra (Rajputs), or Mohammedan as the Punjabi Musalmans, and the Pathan Muslmans, the latter being descendents of Afghan or other Asiatic invaders of India, are reckoned among our best and most willing soldiers."<sup>65</sup>

M. S. Leigh observes :

"Although the Sikhs produced a percentage of recruits during the First World War greatly in excess of their percentage in the population of Punjab, the fact remains that out of the 370,609 combatants recruited from Punjab, 190,078 (51.4%) were Moslems and "only" 97,016 (26%) were Sikhs."<sup>66</sup>

In fact, the lower Hindu contribution to recruits is not due to any selective policy of the Government but is due to the Hindu

population in Punjab being largely urban and well-off in trading and business and, for that matter, being reluctant by tradition to accept risks and hazards of a military career.

**Attacks on Sikh Identity :** The Government of India Act of 1858, which transferred the authority from the East India Company to the Crown brought the Sikhs directly under the Imperial rule. After the loss of political power, a sense of despair pervaded the Sikh society. An editorial in the 'Khalsa Advocate' sums up the situation :

"False Gurus grew up in great numbers whose only business was to fleece their flock and pamper their own self-aggrandisement. Properly speaking, there was no Sikhism. Belief in the Gurus was gone. The idea of brotherhood in Panth was discarded."<sup>67</sup>

Under the circumstances the discerning Sikh mind knew full well that while the chances of engaging themselves successfully in a political battle with the British were slim, it was essential to invoke and strengthen its religious base which was their very source of zeal and vigour.

Advent of Christian missions and spread of western education and science also provoked self-understanding. Naturally, the Sikh mind looked back on its history and ideology with a clear self-discerning eye.

The ideologically and politically conscious wing of the Sikhs was being calculatedly curbed and kept under virtual surveillance. It was a tremendous task to revive the purity of the Sikh doctrine and to rid the faith and its institutions of wrong accretions and adulterations in order to maintain its independence. It was under great difficulties that the Sikhs started their struggle for survival in the mid-nineteenth century. They rightly realised that before they could consciously and usefully start any political struggle with the British masters, they had to revive and reinvigorate their religious understanding and discipline. Like the Sikh Gurus, who had undone the social and religious trammels of Hindu dogmatism and created new motivations and traditions in the Sikh society before preparing and taking up the struggle against

political oppression, the Sikhs at this time decided first to reinforce their socio-religious base and strength before taking up the political challenges.

Contrary to what is generally imagined, the fall of the Sikh kingdom was an episode in the turbulent history of the Sikhs, rather than the close of an epoch. The proudest outcome of the apparent disaster was that it forced Sikhism to exist on the strength of its own ideology and tradition. As has happened so often in history, annexation of a kingdom was followed by religious and political suppressions. The freedom of conscience of the Sikh people was curbed. The period between 1849 and the rise of Singh Sabha was a time of acute pain, trauma, distress, confusion and even of some despair in the Sikh society, which had altogether to face multifarious problems. The British were too conscious to ignore the political potential of their foe that had given them the greatest challenge. Obviously, they were keen that the political objectives of the community should be kept permanently frustrated. For this end, they had taken away and converted the Sikh Maharaja Dalip Singh and virtually exiled the entire family of Ranjit Singh. Similarly, the principal political Sardars were also curbed or hunted out. Such a thing for an erstwhile victor was natural to do and the Sikhs had no illusions in this regard. The British knew very well that the entire vigour and strength of the Sikhs lay in their religious zeal and it was their religion from which they derived their entire inspiration and power. Therefore, with their uncanny understanding they made sure that the Sikh religious places were kept in hands that were hostile to the thesis of the Gurus and sought to divert them to the ritualistic maze of Hinduism.<sup>68</sup>

The contrast is very significant. Whereas the British restored the territory and kingdoms of princes and persons who had revolted during the British rule, they made sure that none from the family of the Maharaja or the Sikh Sardars were allowed to have an opportunity to regain the leadership of the Khalsa because in the case of the Sikhs, they knew, they were dealing not with

individuals, but with a people or a nation imbued with an ideology of liberty and independence. The Sikh princes who remained undisturbed, were those who had always been non-leaders of the community and outside the pale of Sarkar-i-Khalsa.

The second part of the attack on Sikh religion commenced with the arrival of Christian missionaries in the heart of central Punjab under the political wings of the British. Their activities and propaganda as already indicated were significantly subversive to the Sikh religion. In fact, the Missionaries sought in every way to facilitate the colonial expansion of Britain by objectively acting as agents for their country's big capital. They were often unofficial consuls. Third factor was the process and thinking that starts at the time of a ship feared to be sinking. As the bulk of converts of convenience were from Hinduism, most of whom had neither shed their old practices and prejudices nor their socio-ritual connections with their parent community, they started reversion to that fold as also revival of their affinities with the Hindus. That this trend took the form of a serious attack is evident from the virulent activities of Pt. Sharda Ram Phillauri, a top Sanatanist Hindu leader considered to be an agent of the British. He spoke even from the precincts of Darbar Sahib,<sup>69</sup> with the cooperation of British nominees in charge of it. With the rise of Arya Samaj, it also started propaganda against the Sikh religion and vicious personal attacks on the Gurus. Phillauri delivered a series of lectures at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, in which he made disparaging remarks against all the Sikh Gurus.<sup>70</sup> He also published a book entitled *Sikhan De Raj Di Vithya*, in which he misinterpreted the teachings of the Sikh Gurus.<sup>71</sup> The book was prescribed in the Oriental College, Lahore, as a subject of study.<sup>72</sup> Such distorted accounts of Sikhism and Sikh history undermined the prestige of the community. And all this could not happen without the British patronage. Though the British were on the one hand claiming a policy of neutrality towards Indian religions, they were fully and approvingly aware of this multi-pronged attack on the Sikh sources of strength, their religious places and ideology.

The difficulty of some present day arm chair scholars is their

failure to understand the unity of the Sikh ideology and the immeasurable strength and zeal the Sikhs derive from their ideology and the lives of the Gurus. The reality is that both the Mughal and the British rulers were well aware of this intimate connection between the life-affirming moral zeal of the Sikhs and their religion and places of worship. With this awareness in mind Diwan Lakhpat Rai<sup>73</sup> (supported by Yayya Khan) and the Afghan invaders led by Ahmed Shah Abdali sought to destroy Darbar Sahib and fill its sacred tank.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Massa Rangar tried to have his indulgent orgies at the sacred precincts of this great centre of Sikhism.<sup>75</sup> The British also tried to gain the control of the Sikh community in their hands by extending support to the pro-Hindu Mahants and Pujaris of the Sikh temples.<sup>76</sup>

In the beginning of 1873 four Sikh students of the Mission High School, Amritsar, under the influence of the Missionaries, offered themselves to be converted to Christianity.<sup>77</sup> There were protest meetings all over the province and prominent Sikh leaders persuaded the boys not to abandon their faith. But the incident served as an eye-opener to the Sikhs. Sikhism, at this time, came under severe attack. In this state of affairs the traditional Sikh ethos was bound to react.

**Birth of Singh Sabha :—**With a view to mustering forces for an all round Panthic upliftment, some prominent Sikhs including Harsha Singh Dhupia, Thakur Singh Sandhawalia, Baba Sir Khem Singh Bedi and Raja Bikram Singh Kapurthala, convened a meeting in Amritsar in July, 1873. The meeting was attended by leading Sikh chiefs, Sardars, Gianis, Pujaris and Mahants of the Sikh Gurdwaras of Amritsar and the adjoining districts.<sup>78</sup> The new association, Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Amritsar, was formed on July 28, 1873.<sup>79</sup> The object of the Singh Sabha was to take up social, religious and educational programmes.<sup>80</sup> But most of the leaders of the Amritsar Singh Sabha being drawn from the rich, the upper, the privileged and the British supported strata of the Sikh society, were not ready to shed their old prejudices against the low-caste Sikhs. They sided with the Mahants and Pujaris in discriminating against them. This created a gulf between the high

and the low-caste Sikhs and, thus, the movement failed to gain the support of the masses because this behaviour of the Mahants and Pujaris was clearly contrary to the basic tenets and practice of Sikhism.<sup>81</sup> Baba Khem Singh Bedi tried to wield absolute control over the activities of the Sabha. Being a direct descendent of Guru Nanak, he aspired for reverence due to a Guru and claimed some privileges. His followers called him *Avtar* (incarnation of God).<sup>82</sup> He wanted a well-furnished seat (*gudela*) for himself even in the presence of the Holy Granth.<sup>83</sup> This shocked the Sikh feelings.<sup>84</sup>

The Amritsar group adopted and approved anti-Sikh practices like discrimination, idol worship and personal worship and made ideological distortions.<sup>85</sup> Naturally, persons conversant with the Sikh tradition objected to all these aberrations resulting in a schism and formation of the Lahore Singh Sabha in November 1879.<sup>86</sup> It is significant to say that the chief organisers of this Sabha were devoted Sikhs with humble beginnings, whereas the Amritsar Group was clearly British backed. The Lahore Singh Sabha developed a broad and comprehensive outlook, making no distinction between the high and low-caste Sikhs and extending its activities both to the urban and rural masses of Punjab. They preached and practised Sikh value system as required by the Guru Granth. They strongly opposed the institution of human worship and regarded all men as equals.<sup>87</sup> They judged a man by his worth and not by his birth. Bhai Gurmukh Singh made an appeal to the Sikhs of all castes and classes, to enlist themselves as volunteers of the newly formed Sabha and to carry its message to every nook and corner of the Punjab.<sup>88</sup>

The religious revival under Singh Sabha was a protest against forms and ceremonies and class distinctions based on birth. It was ethical in its preference for a pure heart, the law of love, and good works. This religious revival was the work of the people, of the masses, and not of the classes. At its head were leaders like Ditt Singh, Gurmukh Singh and others, who sprang chiefly from the lower orders of society—Ramdasias, weavers, cooks, clerks, shopkeepers, and peasants rather than the gilded gentry. Thus, the gulf between the privileged and the British-backed and the



Sikh oriented groups started and continued. And, it is this basic difference which some of the scholars ignore.

Whereas the appeal of the Amritsar Singh Sabha was mostly confined to the personal pockets of influence of its leaders, that of the Lahore Singh Sabha went further and touched the hearts of the general mass of the community. Lahore party sent its *Parcharaks* (preachers) even in the interior of the State to spread the message of Sikhism among hundreds and thousands of the village folks, who constituted the backbone of the Sikh community and without whose co-operation no movement could acquire a mass base. Simultaneously, the Lahore Singh Sabha opened branches in many towns. By 1882, the Singh Sabhas sprang up at places like Peshawar, Bannu, Kohat, Ebetabad, Jullundur, Gujranwala, Lyallpur, Patiala, Simla, Jhelum, Ludhiana, Ambala, Quetta, Multan and Jind.<sup>89</sup> Lahore Singh Sabha served as a model for all these Sabhas. Since the Lahore Singh Sabha was working in line with the Sikh tradition and the Amritsar Singh Sabha was concerned only in maintaining their own personal position and privileges, very soon, except for three Singh Sabhas all rural and urban Singh Sabhas joined the Lahore Sabha.<sup>90</sup>

McLeod calls the section of the Singh Sabha that promoted the Sikh identity the "stronger" one. This statement begs the question. The real question to answer, which McLeod avoids, is why it proved to be the stronger, the better and the wiser leadership. For, there is no reason to assume that the Lahore Singh Sabha was in material respects more influential. In fact from the angle of social status and available resources, the Lahore Singh Sabhaites were men of meagre means and belonged to the lowest Sikh class and castes. On the other hand the Amritsar Singh Sabha belonged to the gilded gentry including Knights and Princes, who looked upon the British as their masters. Thus, if the British had their way they would have their designs executed through their own and rich loyalists who looked up to them both for their gained strength and future prospects. By none of the normal socio-economic factors can the Lahore Singh Sabha be called the stronger one. What McLeod seems to conceal by calling

them stronger is the moral strength and sap which they drew from the Guru Granth and the lives of the Gurus. Hence McLeod's own reluctant admission of the strength of the Lahore Singh Sabha demolishes the very basis of his argument that the Sikh identity which the Lahore party espoused was either a created or a planted one, or not the only original one. McLeod seems to conceal the facts, of which he could not be unaware, that originally the only Singh Sabha with all its branches was headed by the rich and gilded gentry. It is later that on ideological grounds some junior and unprivileged members broke away from it and formed the Lahore Singh Sabha.

No political, economic or social factor in any sense contributed to its growth and spread except its ability to invoke the Sikh doctrines in the Guru Granth. It is still later that all except three branches of the old Singh Sabha shifted their affiliation from the old to the new Singh Sabha. We do not think it is fair for a scholar to suppress or omit such a fact and to suggest to the reader that the British supported the Lahore Singh Sabha because it was the "stronger" one. The Lahore Sabha's appeal to the masses lay in the Sikh doctrines and not in any material, British or social factor. It appears the author has been unable to shed the communal bias that is naturally associated with long years of functioning in Christian Missionary organisations in Punjab.

Again there arose a schism in the first meeting of the newly constituted Khalsa Diwan (on April 11, 1883), when Baba Khem Singh Bedi suggested that the title of the Singh Sabha should be changed to Sikh Singh Sabha.<sup>91</sup> The object was to include the *Sehjdhari* Sikhs. But the proposal was considered motivated, being only a method to include, under the garb, Hindu followers of the gilded Bedis making regular offerings to them. It was straight away opposed and rejected outright. At this time, these Bedis along with Thakur Singh Sandhawalia and their followers were inspired by their personal interests in restoring the rule of Dalip Singh.<sup>92</sup> They were planning to support Dalip Singh to come to Punjab to reclaim his lost kingdom. Sandhawalia, who was

related to Dalip Singh, went to England in 1884 on invitation of the latter. As things were, it would have been naive to hope that any worthwhile political rebellion could be organised in the State. For, the British with their experience of 1857 were quite cautious and alert and they sent back Dalip Singh from Aden.

The Lahore leaders strictly wanted to adhere to the Sikh ideology enjoined in the Guru Granth and practised in the tradition. Baba Khem Singh Bedi desired to assume the role of a spiritual guide and Raja Bikram Singh aspired to become the temporal head of the whole in maintaining the five symbols.<sup>93</sup> Baba was, therefore, ready to allow some laxity community.<sup>94</sup> The Lahore group maintained that Sikhism was as proclaimed by the Guru Granth, the Gurus and the Sikh tradition. They laid emphasis on *Rehat* prescribed by the Tenth Guru. They did not tolerate any attempted compromise with Hinduism.<sup>95</sup>

The activities of the Singh Sabha were focussed on the deprecation of un-Sikh like customs and social evils and the encouragement of modern education. The revivalist impulse stirred the Sikhs to an awareness of their faith and impelled them to resuscitate the essential contents of Sikh beliefs. It was a trying time for the Sikhs, because their religion was under serious attack from the resurgent Arya Samaj section of the Hindus.<sup>96</sup> In this context, the move of the Amritsar Singh Sabha to own and promote Hindu practices among their followers had to be repelled as a serious departure from the Sikh tradition. Hence, Singh Sabha had to fight on many fronts against the Arya Samaj, against the Christian missionaries, against the British-backed elite of their own community, and against the corruption of the British patronised Mahants and Pujaris who practiced anti-Sikh rites at the sacred Sikh shrines. The Sikh literature was collected, scanned, edited and compiled. Amongst these was Bhai Kahn Singh's well-known work 'Mahan Kosh' and the 'Ham Hindu Nahin' (Sikhs are not Hindus) as a rejoinder to the Arya Samaj propaganda that the Sikhs were Hindus.

The British government at this time was also ready to encourage freedom of thought, ideas of reforms on modern lines and

even social revolt so long as these did not touch the dangerous ground of politics.<sup>97</sup> The Government appreciated the diversion of people's attention from politics to religious and social reform. It refrained from adopting any such policy as would further antagonise the Sikhs, arouse their military instincts and remind them of their lost glory. The following remarks of Lord Lawrence are note-worthy in this connection: "The Sikhs were the bravest and the most chivalrous race in India and they now seemed disposed to submit with manly self-restraint to our superior power, if only we use it with equity and toleration."<sup>98</sup>

The British were extra cautious in dealing with the Sikhs and this is borne by observation of Sir Richard Temple: "Sikhism, though quiet and loyal at present, is one of those inflammable things of which a spark might kindle into a flame. Its idiosyncrasy and susceptibilities are thoroughly understood by the Punjab authorities and its fidelity to the Empire is well preserved. It would stand proof against many trials and temptations, but if tried over much, it would re-assert itself and would assume the leadership of a national movement."<sup>99</sup> This emphasizes two important realities of the day. First, that Sikhism was not an amorphous, ambiguous or confused and dispersed reality. Because of its ideology and a community having been welded into a society of religious heroes, and its Socio-Political history of suffering and martyrdoms, under the severest trials, it was a society with the greatest potential. This is the assessment of an important erstwhile adversary. Secondly, the British objective which is clear enough, is to see that the enormous potential does not get to be used or exploited against them. For that matter, while it was natural, as we shall see, for the adversary to slowly erode that potential, Temple suggests that it would be unwise to unnecessarily provoke the Sikhs regarding minor issues, lest the inflammable material should explode against them. Accordingly, it would be naive for any historian not to understand the British policies and the course of events, or ignore the assessment of the Chief British actors of the times.

Sir Richard Temple's expression of British policy is extremely

revealing of the British mind. So far as the Sikhs were concerned they very well understood the natural and logical basis of that policy, namely, that while the British would not mind helping and placating the Sikhs on minor and non-essential issues, they would never tolerate any sufferance of their political interests. It is for this reason that both the Singh Sabhas had incorporated a clause in their constitution that they would not indulge in political matters.

**Political Suppression of the Sikhs :** The last quarter of the nineteenth century was primarily devoted to reviving the strength of the community by educating them in their religion and tradition. The main emphasis was on social and religious fields. Having discreetly reconstructed these aspects of the Sikh society, slowly and surely the Singh Sabha Movement took up the political problems as well. With the formation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1902, there came a significant change in the attitude of the Singh Sabha leaders towards politics. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the rising tide of political consciousness and the new born awareness arising from the regeneration brought about by the Singh Sabha movement promoted the leaders of the Chief Khalsa Diwan to play their role in the political life of the province. They took it upon themselves "to safeguard the political rights of the Sikhs."<sup>100</sup>

The passing of the Universities Act, in 1904, which required greater official control over the management of the Khalsa College, Amritsar, made the Diwan leaders sceptical of British intentions.<sup>101</sup> Even the proposal of the Government to give an annual grant of rupees ten thousand to the College, provided the constitution of the managing body was maintained according to the wishes of the Government, was viewed to be fraught with mischief. In 1907, a fresh controversy erupted when the Government forced Sardar Dharam Singh, who was working in an honorary capacity as the Engineer-in-charge of the College, to be replaced by a European engineer, Major Hill. The College Managing Committee dissociated itself from the activities of the Government appointed Engineer. This resulted in a direct confrontation

between the College Governing Council and the Government. *The Punjab*, Lahore, in its issue dated May 1, 1908, observed: "One can imagine the plight of students studying in Khalsa College whose management is going to be dominated by the Christians." The government authorities handed over the management of the College to a nominated body with the Commissioner as Chairman, and later on June 10, 1908 forced a new constitution on the Governing Body.<sup>102</sup>

In November 1908, one member of the House of Commons raised a question in the British Parliament, whether the Government of India was aware of the fact that the new management of the Khalsa College had created resentment among the Sikhs and whether the Government was doing any thing to remove this resentment.<sup>103</sup> Master Sunder Singh of Lyallpur wrote a book, *Ki Khalsa Kalaj Sikhan Da Hai ?*, in which he clearly stated that government control over the Khalsa College had hurt the national pride of the Sikhs. He accused the British of having taken over the college in the same dishonest manner as it had annexed the Panjab.<sup>104</sup> D Petrie, Assistant Director, Criminal Intelligence, mentions the sentiments of a Sikh student of Khalsa College, who after the Amritsar Educational Conference expressed himself as follows :

"I am not afraid to die. All life is sacrifice.  
If I had been allowed to live, I might  
have done great things by sacrifice.  
Until the nation realises that lives must  
be sacrificed, it will never come to anything."<sup>104-a</sup>

Petrie also stated that a Khalsa College student had been openly advising people in his village not to serve British Government any more.

The year of 1907 saw the beginning of a political agitation in the Punjab in connection with the Colonisation Bill of 1907, which was considered to be unduly oppressive to the Punjabi agriculturists. The Bill was passed on the assumption that the land was the property of the Government and the farmer was a mere tenant. This was contrary to the prevailing notions of peasant-proprietor-

ship, continuing from the times of Banda Bahadur. The districts most affected by the new measure were Lyallpur and Rawalpindi, mainly colonised by the Sikhs. Some Singh Sabha preachers (*Updeshaks*) like Jagat Singh Updeshak and Harbans Singh Attari were accused by the Government of instigating the agriculturists against the authorities.<sup>105</sup> The students of Khalsa College Amritsar also organised a protest demonstration against Sir Charles Rivaz, the Lt. Governor of the Punjab.<sup>106</sup> Agitation concerning the Colonisation Bill was an important event. The chief strength of the Sikhs was a bold peasantry that possessed proprietary rights in their lands. This was an important Sikh reform different from the Zimindari system in most other parts of India. Under the Colonisation Bill, the British proposed that the peasant would not have the proprietary rights which they had during the Sikh rule. This was felt to be an important step to reduce the economic, social and political strength of the colonists, most of whom were Sikhs. They reacted against this contemplated erosion of their socio-economic base. This reaction of the Sikh colonists is significant. Because it was based on the Sikh tradition and the fact that it was Banda Bahadur, who had introduced the system of peasant proprietorship and created among the masses a real consciousness of equality and the strength to defend their rights.

The founding of the Sikh Educational Conference by the Chief Khalsa Diwan, in 1908, was also viewed by the Government to be fraught with political motives.<sup>107</sup> It was alleged that "the Conference was founded by the Chief Khalsa Diwan, which resenting Government's interference in Khalsa College affairs in 1908, resolved to build a new Sikh College independent of Government control and devised in the Conference a means of collecting funds for this object."<sup>108</sup> Though declared to be non-political institution, the Sikh Educational Conference did provide a forum to the Singh Sabha leaders to express their views on the day-to-day affairs—religious, social, educational and even political. Some of the speeches delivered at various conferences by the Chief Khalsa Diwan leaders were thought to be marked with

strong political bias. At the third Sikh Educational Conference held at Amritsar in 1910, Professor Jodh Singh of the Khalsa College, Amritsar, was charged with giving 'seditious talk' in connection with the Government system of education.<sup>109</sup> The British Government also began to view the activities of Sunder Singh Majithia, Tarlochan Singh (Pleader), Professor Jodh Singh and Harbans Singh Attari with suspicion.<sup>110</sup> The authorities also noticed that teachers like Nihal Singh, Sunder Singh, Niranjana Singh, Hari Singh Cheema and others were openly provoking the students against the British.<sup>111</sup>

It was said that in the course of their lectures these teachers, quite often, referred to the days of Sikh ascendancy, their past glory and their present subjugation.<sup>112</sup> The students were so much excited that in 1910, when R.C. Wright took over as the Principal of the Khalsa College, they expressed their resentment against an Englishman's appointment by pasting handbills on the College walls.<sup>113</sup> On another occasion, when Gopal Krishan Gokhale came to Amritsar, he was given a hearty welcome by the students of the Khalsa College. Their enthusiasm was reflected in the fact that they even unyoked his horses and themselves pulled his carriage to the College, where his lecture was listened to with thunderous applause.<sup>114</sup>

The British acted in defiance of the Sikh sentiments and interests. The Minto-Morley Reforms, of 1909, were discriminatory against the Sikhs. The Muslim minority was conceded separate representation and weightage in the States where they were a minority, as well as at the Centre. Similar consideration was not shown to the Sikhs in Punjab. This shows that the British were always niggardly, when it was a question of promoting Sikh political interests. Hardly they were given the same treatment as the Muslim minority. In the face of this evidence it would be a clear misrepresentation of facts to say that the British ever promoted political identity or strength of the Sikhs. As the events are, they show that they were carefully reluctant to adopt policies that would build the real strength of the community.



The *Khalsa Advocate*, Amritsar, which was the chief spokesman of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, was administered warning three times, between 1911 and 1922, for printing 'objectionable matters.'<sup>115</sup> *Khalsa Samachar*, Amritsar, in one of its issues, delivered the following message to the Sikhs on the occasion of Guru Gobind Singh's birthday: "The founder of the Khalsa; Guru Gobind Singh, fought against tyranny and oppression and expelled darkness. He sacrificed his life for the cause of justice and righteousness. O' brave Khalsa ! Wake up ! Follow in the Guru's footsteps. The country is again in the throes of tyranny and needs sacrifices."<sup>116</sup>

It was not an easy task for the Singh Sabha to restore the values and objectives of the Sikh faith, in view of the stern posture adopted by the British at every step. The Arms Act of 1878, had placed a check on the rights of the Sikhs to wear *Kirpan* (Sword), which is one of the five essential symbols of the Sikh faith. The movement for emancipation of *Kirpan* was started in 1913, when Baba Nihal Singh was arrested for wearing a *Kirpan*.<sup>117</sup> The incident sent a wave of indignation among the Sikhs. The Chief Khalsa Diwan and the Singh Sabha held hundreds of meetings. Consequently, an agitation was launched. After some Sikhs had suffered arrests, the Government exempted these Sikhs from the Arms Act and allowed them the possession and the wearing of the *Kirpan* on June 25, 1914.<sup>118</sup> In spite of the exemption for wearing *Kirpan*, the Sikh soldiers were still not allowed to wear it in the army. Three soldiers at Roorkee were punished and dismissed for wearing it. The Singh Sabhas held protest meetings but they were not taken back. Bhai Mangal Singh of the 34th Sikh Regiment, who was afterwards martyred at Nanakana Sahib, was dismissed and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment (R.I.) for the same fault. It was only after First World War that the Government sanctioned the wearing of *Kirpan* by Sikh soldiers both in uniform and plain clothes, while serving on the active list.<sup>119</sup> McLeod seems unaware of the *Kirpan* agitation, when he states that the British required the "Sikh recruits to observe the

full regalia of the orthodox Khalsa identity.<sup>120</sup> Fox too suffers from a similar mis-conception, when he says that the Sikh identity and their religious values were subsidised by the British.<sup>121</sup> In this context N.G. Barrier's opinion that the British played an important role in maintaining Sikh identity<sup>122</sup> looks so odd especially when it contradicts his own observations in defence of British neutrality towards the three Punjab communities. Want of indepth study has led these scholars completely to overlook the overwhelming evidence relating to the Singh Sabha struggle for their religious rights, whether it be the Anand Marriage Act (1909), or the right to wear *Kirpan*, or the control over the shrines and other institutions. The lack of clear perception has led them to make confusing and contradictory statements regarding the British motives and policies. The confusion arises mainly because the general policy of the British, after the Mutiny, was not to disturb the religious norms of the soldier. So far as the British policy in the field was concerned, it was obviously directed against the promotion of the Sikh ideological identity.

The Chief Khalsa Diwan preachers consciously mingled politics with religion in the course of their speeches. The tone of their speeches clearly reflected their dissatisfaction with British government. Political and economic backwardness of the community was attributed to the loss of political power. The preachers, quite often, referred to the days of political ascendancy of the Khalsa and tended to compare their political subjugation with the bitter experiences of the past under the Mughals. The preachers argued that the Sikhs suffered under the Mughals because of the tyranny of the rulers. As a corollary, the responsibility for the existing state of affairs then was attributed to the British. The Government began to suspect the motives and designs of the Singh Sabha preachers.<sup>123</sup> Many cases were reported to the Government in which Sikh preachers were found instigating the people against the Government.<sup>124</sup> In spite of their handicaps, in the earlier stages, the Singh Sabha *Parcharaks* (Preachers), through their emphasis on religion, were able to make successful appeal to the Sikh mind and to awaken the Sikh consciousness to its religio-

political entity. The organisation of festivals, prayer-meetings, *Nagar Kirtans* (religious processions) and *Kavi Samelans* (Religio-poetical recitations) was attempted to escape the notice of the intelligence authorities who normally prohibited political activities and gatherings. This role of the Singh Sabha preachers in awakening the Sikh masses from religion to politics is important. A contemporary Government report noted : "The Chief Khalsa Diwan keeps a staff of paid preachers (*Updeshaks*) who stamp the country and lecture on various topics—social, educational, religious, political, and more often than not, all four are inextricably intermingled."<sup>125</sup>

Sikh militancy assumed alarming proportions with the Rikabganj Gurdawara affair in 1913.<sup>126</sup> The Government unthinkingly acquired some land attached to the Gurdawara and demolished its outer wall so that a road could be built to the nearby Secretariat.<sup>127</sup> "A bitter agitation arose among the Sikh masses."<sup>128</sup> The Sikhs agitated and threatened to launch a *Morcha* but it was abandoned because of the First World War.<sup>129</sup>

It is well known that the translation of the Sikh scripture, which the British had commissioned a Christian missionary Dr. Trumpp to undertake, was full of derogatory references to the Sikh Gurus and was offensive to the Sikh sentiments. On the other hand, scholars like J.D. Cunningham, Evans Bell, and John Sullivan had to suffer extreme penalties of dismissal from service for writing honest accounts, but what the Government considered to be pro-Sikh. M.A. Macauliffe, who produced a monumental work on Sikh religion, in six volumes, also did not find favour with the British and was not given the benefits and advantages enjoyed by Dr. Trumpp, who wrote against the Sikhs.

**Rebellion in Punjab :** The failure of the Government to protect the rights of the Sikh immigrants living in Canada and America, who were the victims of racial discrimination, led to the formation of a revolutionary organisation known as the Hindustan Ghadr Party. The object of the Ghadr Party was to spread an armed rebellion and free the country from the foreign

yoke.<sup>130</sup> War was considered a good opportunity to cause the rebellion, especially because early British reverses involving large scale casualties of the Sikh soldiers from the rural areas seemed to the Ghadrites a ripe stage for their objective.<sup>131</sup>

Ghadr Party was virtually a Sikh organisation and Sohan Singh Bhakna was its President. These persons came to Punjab and started their subversive activities both in rural central Punjab and among the Sikh solidery. By the end of 1914, the Ghadrites succeeded in sending one thousand revolutionaries to India out of the total membership of ten thousand. Some of the Singh Sabhas, were said to be sympathetic to the Ghadrites. Bhai Takhat Singh entertained the delegates of the Ghadr Party when they visited Ferozepur. Daljit Singh, assistant editor of the 'Punjabi Bain' a monthly publication of the Sikh Kanya Maha Vidyalā, Ferozepur, joined the Ghadrites and became a Secretary of Baba Gurdit Singh, a leader of the Ghadr Party.<sup>132</sup> "The methods to be employed by the delegates (of the Ghadr Party) in pushing campaign in India appeared to have been discussed in the weekly meetings of the Singh Sabha at Lahore.....A member of the Singh Sabha in advocating these measures spoke of creating a spirit of awakening among Hindus and Sikhs."<sup>133</sup> However, the Government succeeded in crushing the rebellion before it could assume bigger dimensions. Before the appointed date for large scale rebellion in the army or the state could be started, information leaked out at Lahore. A wide spread hunt for the rebels in the state was made and scores were hanged and sent to transportation for life.

The Ghadrites, to their chagrin, discovered that the Congress leaders were more sympathetic to the British rather than to the Ghadrite revolutionaries.<sup>134</sup> Tilak, the so called 'militant' Congressite had expressed his strong and open disapproval of the activities of the Ghadrites. Gokhale is said to have openly told the Viceroy that he would like the British to extend their stay in India.<sup>135</sup> There is no denying the fact that the Ghadr Movement received a set-back on account of lack of support from the Congress leadership and their persecution evoked no sympathy

from these quarters. This is an important political event which influenced the Sikhs and their psyche. In the Sikh vision of independence Kartar Singh Sarabha is as great a hero as, if not greater than, Bhagat Singh. In his memory the first statue was raised in Ludhiana, though statues of other heroes, including of Bhagat Singh, were raised much later.

In this regard three things are extremely significant. The rebellion was, by and large, a Sikh affair and took place mostly in rural Punjab. Nothing of this sort or extent happened in the rest of the country. Ninety per cent of the participants and the sufferers were Sikhs. The second point is that two of the noted Sikh mystics, Baba Wasakha Singh and Bhai Randhir Singh were the participants, who were sent to Andamans as life convicts. This indicates that in Sikhism there is a basic and inalienable ideological link between religion and righteous political activity. Third, it is noteworthy that while Sikh masses were politically awakened to sustain a rebellion, persons who later became political leaders of the Congress or Indian independence were whole-heartedly co-operating with the British War effort during this period, and the idea of liberation was beyond their ken, if not foreign to them.

Here it is relevant to quote the confessional statement of Mewa Singh, in 1914, who had eliminated William Hopkinson recruited from India for suppressing a ferment among Canadian and American Sikhs and whose agent Bela Singh had murdered two Sikhs in the Gurdwara. Prior to his execution he stated: "My religion does not teach me to bear enmity with anybody, no matter what class, creed or order he belongs to, nor had I any enmity with Hopkinson. I heard that he was suppressing my poor people very much...I being a staunch Sikh could no longer bear to see the wrong done both to my innocent countrymen and the Dominion of Canada.... And I, performing the duty of a true Sikh and remembering the name of God, will proceed towards the scaffold with the same amount of pleasure as the hungry babe does towards its mother. I shall have the rope around my neck thinking it to be a rosary of God's name..."<sup>136</sup>

Now, who had taught Mewa Singh an ordinary Sikh coming from a remote Punjab village and migrating to Canada for earning his living, an essential principle of the Sikh religion, namely, to react against social injustice. It would be naive to say that Mewa Singh or the Ghadriles were the product of British policy. What the Singh Sabha did was to revive and invoke the teachings, training and traditions of the Gurus. For, the history of Sikhism and other whole-life religions clearly demonstrates that it is the blood of the martyrs that alone can create a healthy and sound moral conditioning of the masses and not any artificial administrative attempts in pursuance of colonial interests.

When the War came to an end in 1918, the Sikhs launched a strong agitation under the leadership of Harchand Singh of Lyallpur and Sardul Singh Caveeshar. They appealed to the Sikhs to volunteer themselves for the **Shaheedee Jatha** (band of martyrs) and to join a march to Delhi to re-erect the demolished wall of the Gurdwara Rakab Ganj. However, the timely intervention of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha saved the situation from getting worse. The Government acceded to the Sikh demand by restoring the Gurdawara wall.<sup>137</sup>

The tragedy of Budge Budge Ghat came as a bolt from the blue for the Sikhs. A group of Sikh immigrants returning from Canada became the victims of the British high-handedness. Eighteen men were killed and another twenty five were injured.<sup>138</sup> However, Gurdit Singh, their leader, along with twenty eight of his companions escaped. The rest were rounded up and sent to Punjab, where over two hundred of them were interned under the Ingress Ordinance. This incident was universally condemned and the Sikh public opinion was greatly mobilised against the British. "Several Sikh papers notably the *Khalsa Akhbar* (of Harchand Singh of Lyallpur) and *Sher-i-Punjab*, both started in 1914 attacked the Government in connection with the Budge Budge Ghat incident."<sup>139</sup>

Sardul Singh Caveeshar an important contemporary writes, "The Kamagata Maru tragedy at Budge Budge was another cause

of estrangement between the Sikhs and the Government. Through the foolishness of some police officers, a tragedy was enacted at Budge Budge that threw the whole of India into consternation..... The subsequent ruthless treatment of the returned immigrants by Sir Michael O' Dwyer did not allow the sore to heal; and the injustice done to India and the Sikhs by the Canadian Government became a permanent cause of grievance against the British."<sup>140</sup>

Thus this post-war policy of the British resulting in such like incidents, created both resentment and anger among the Sikhs in Punjab. Caveeshar observes: "The Sikhs were in this attitude of mind, when they were thrown in the vortex of Martial Law as a consequence of agitation against the Rowlatt Act."<sup>141</sup>

The Sikh mind was seriously disturbed. Agitation against the Rowlatt Act started while the Sikh feelings were pent up. This aggravated the Sikh feelings in the Central Punjab, who were already aggrieved at the treatment of the Canadian Government and the returned immigrants from there at Budge Budge Ghat. This led to violent reaction as reported in the Government communique: "The last communique issued brought the history of events in Lahore and Amritsar as then known down to the afternoon of the 12th of April (1919). The information in the Government was not complete at the time of its issue. The morning train from Ferozepur on the 12th was held up outside Kasur Station and looted by a mob of about 1,000; of whom many were armed with lathis. Two Europeans, honorary Lieutenant Selby of the Ordinance and Sergeant Mostyn, R.A., were killed and another was injured. After looting the train and doing a great deal of damage in the Station, the crowd burnt the post office and attacked the Tehsil. Here, however, they were driven off by the police with a loss of one killed and about six wounded. Some arrests were made. Several stations on the Kasur and Amritsar line were attacked the same day. Khem Karan station was looted and treasury at Tarn Taran was assaulted unsuccessfully. As a result of these disturbances it was decided to march a movable column with a gun from Kasur through the Majha to Amritsar.

The column started on the morning of Sunday, the 13th, and arrived at Khem Karan.

On Sunday, the 13th, the Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act, 1911, was applied to the districts of Lahore and Amritsar which were declared to be proclaimed areas under the Act. The result of this action is to make it illegal to hold, without permission, a public meeting for the furtherance or discussion of any subject likely to cause disturbance or public excitement without permission.<sup>142</sup>

The events mentioned above clearly explain why unlike in the rest of the country, the agitation against the Rowlatt Act took a serious rebellious trend in the central districts of Punjab where the Sikh population was predominant. This also explains why despite the prohibitory order in the districts of Lahore and Amritsar, thousands of Sikhs came to Amritsar on the Baisakhi and later thronged at the Jallianwala Bagh in defiance of the local order banning the holding of any meeting in the city. That this defiant agitation was predominantly a rural Sikh reaction is evident from the fact that out of the total casualties of 1300 more than sixty per cent were Sikhs, when it is well known that Sikh population in the city was just marginal.<sup>143</sup>

An important fact which has often been ignored is that in Punjab most agitations have been mass upsurges and movements unlike those in the rest of India, where those have generally been either among the literate classes or in the urban areas. In Punjab since the Ghadr rebellion, the trial and sentences of death and transportation of life to Ghadrites following it and the events preceding and following the Budge Budge Ghat tragedy were a chain of occurrences that never allowed the enlivened and agitated Sikh spirit to rest in peace. From the time of the Ghadr rebellion upto the Jallianwala Bagh firing the Sikh Punjab had remained in continuous ferment. As against it, the position in the rest of India had been very different and one fact alone indicates the climate, namely, that Mahatma Gandhi had earned during that period two Medals, Kaiser-i-Hind and Zulu War Medal.<sup>144</sup> As stated already, the Congress leaders like Gokhale, Tilak and Lajpat Rai



were sympathetic to the British and condemned the Ghadr revolutionaries, whose activities, they openly disapproved.<sup>145</sup> It is difficult to deny that this reaction of Indian political leaders gave support to the British and caused a set back to the movement of the Ghadrites.

The Ghadr unrest in central rural Punjab leading to the times of Sikh gathering at Jallianwala Bagh and the oppression indulged by the British administration in the rural Punjab is primarily and fundamentally a continuous episode in the Sikh struggle for independence. In fact, it is only incidentally a part of the Indian political movement which till then was living in a cooperative mood and enjoying the benefits of the Raj. Much less had it gained any momentum or level to make such a confrontation and suffer large-scale oppression. Another fact which indicates the Sikh character of the agitation is that it was G.A. Wathen, the Principal of the premier Sikh educational institution in Punjab, who felt so deeply concerned at the activities of General Dyer that he ran on a motor-cycle from Amritsar to Lahore and woke up Governor O'Dwyer to request him not to approve Dyer's action.<sup>146</sup> It is very relevant and important to understand the complexion of events in Punjab. The fact is that the pre-Jallianwala Bagh rebellion was a Sikh affair in the Punjab and for that matter the reaction and the repression perpetrated by Dyer and O'Dwyer were directed against the Sikhs. That explains how the rural mind of Udham Singh remained deeply agitated and aggrieved to prompt him to act against O'Dwyer, the person responsible for the Punjab tragedies of the period. Here it is also significant to state that the basic inspiration that sustained or inspired Udham Singh to attack O'Dwyer was religious. This is also evidenced by his letters and his demand for 'Gutka', the Sikh prayer Book of Gurbani.<sup>147</sup> It is also relevant in this connection, that whereas the non-Sikh Indian communities in U.K. disowned him, he was supported only by the Sikhs of a Gurdwara of West London.<sup>148</sup>

The above narration of facts shows that following the Singh Sabha Movement side by side with the religious awakening, the

Sikh political consciousness and their reaction against the British measures became increasingly open and firm. It is also clear that the British had always been vigilant in this regard and never failed to suppress, to the extent possible, the growth of Sikh political consciousness. The important fact, as explained by us, is that under the Sikh ideology religious consciousness, socio-political consciousness and consequent responsibility and reaction go hand in hand. The net result was that in 1919 the Sikh religious and socio-political consciousness had reached, because of its tradition and history, a distinctly higher level of commitment and activity than among the people in other parts of the country. This is clearly borne from a contemporary Government Report: "the Home Rule Agitation and Rowlatt Bills exercised an undesirable affect on the whole press. The Sikh press ventilated petty grievances that the Government was unmindful of the true interests of the Sikhs."<sup>149</sup> Thus, it is this that explains the role of the Sikhs in the Ghadr revolution and that of Mewa Singh in Canada. Significant as it is, at that time the Indian political leaders had mostly been cooperating with the British war efforts. This clearly explains, as we have seen, that when Gandhi after giving up his role of cooperation during the War, gave the call against the Rowlatt Bills, the response and reaction in Punjab was urgent and significant compared to such reaction in parts of the country where the call had been given. For the Sikhs, it was only a continuation of the socio-political struggle which the Singh Sabha had initiated.

The brutal massacre of Jallianwala Bagh in 1919, in which hundreds of Sikhs were killed and wounded, added fuel to the fire. After the Singh Sabha Movement had helped the Sikhs to regain their strength and cohesion, the Sikhs felt that it was time they cleared their Gurdwaras from the non-Sikh Mahants and the adverse influences which had the clear backing of the British. So far as the political consciousness is concerned, it has always been a part of the Sikh ethos, as has been evidenced by the Kuka and the Ghadr Movements. With the Singh Sabha, as we shall see, it was only a question of tactical move when they

for some decades remained quiet on the political front. In order to remove the confusion and despondency, naturally prevalent after annexation, they wanted first to rebuild their socio-religious cohesion. Tempers rose very high when the Manager and priests of the Darbar Sahib condemned the Kamagata Maru and Ghadrke Sikhs at the Akal Takhat. Later on, they presented a robe of honour to Brigadier-General Dyer, who was responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.<sup>150</sup>

It was such suicidal policies of the British that Principal Wathen had rushed to stop. As a saying goes, it is human blunders that sometimes suddenly change the course of history. During these days, there spread an unfounded rumour among the Sikh masses, as well as the Sikhs in the British Indian army that since the Sikhs were involved in the Anti-Rowlatt Act agitation and had used the Golden Temple complex as their hide out, the British authorities had resorted to aerial bombardment of the Golden Temple.<sup>151</sup> This infuriated Sikhs all over Punjab. To quell this unrest the army took over the administration, and whatever vestiges of a civilised government had remained also vanished. The British Government's actions at Amritsar set the tone of "Dyerachy" for the rest of the province in which the Sikhs were the worst sufferers of the ruthless repression and suppression carried on by the Government. Sikh villages were subjected to bombing and machine-gunning from the air; one of the targets successfully hit was the Khalsa High School at Gujranwala, where many people were killed and wounded.<sup>152</sup> In the seven weeks that the Punjab was administered by martial law nearly 1200 were killed and at least 3600 were wounded. All this brutal repression came as a shock to the Sikh masses. Winston Churchill made the most scathing criticism of General Dyer's action. He described it as "an episode which appeared to be without parallel in the modern history of the British Empire... an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stood in singular and sinister isolation."<sup>154</sup>

In this context and the known misuse of the Sikhs Gurdwaras, the Sikhs became acutely conscious that they could no longer

afford to permit their own sacred shrines to become places of corruption, and also to be used to destroy the very roots and the sap that in history had given them unbelievable strength and vigour. Here after started the Gurdwara reform movement and the peacefully organised confrontation with the British. For, the cover had been lifted and it had become clear that behind the priests and the Mahants stood the strength and might of the British. Consequently and logically as a second important step, the Sikhs did the greatest mobilisation against the Government for regaining the control of their Gurdwaras from the corrupt hands.

The Chief Khalsa Diwan had, no doubt, formed a sub-committee to suggest ways and means to reform the Gurdwaras but it could not take effective measures owing to the stiff opposition of the Mahants and Pujaris, who enjoyed the support and protection of the Government. In 1919, the Central Sikh League was established at Amritsar, with a view to protecting the political interests of the Sikhs.<sup>155</sup> The League passed a resolution of non-cooperation with the British Government in October, 1919. Its meeting was attended by Harbans Singh Attari, Baba Kharak Singh and Master Tara Singh. In 1920 the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee was established and undertook to 'take over' all the shrines including the Darbar Sahib.<sup>156</sup> The establishment of this committee brought the issues to a wider notice. Thus "a movement which was religious in origin rapidly acquired a political character."<sup>157</sup> The Sikhs now began to realise that a clash with the Government was inevitable in order to secure justice and safeguard their interests.

Thus the Singh Sabha movement, after the period of reconstruction, naturally, gave birth to the Akali movement which was equally motivated by religious as well as political considerations. The following remarks of V.M. Smith, a contemporary observer, are illuminating in this respect: "All Sikh traditions, whether national or religious, are martial; in times of political excitement the militant spirit reasserts itself."<sup>158</sup> It was therefore, natural that at that stage of history, the Sikhs should come into direct

clash with the British policies which, as we have explained earlier, were hostile to their political and ideological interests.

**Conclusion :** The above narration of events shows that two aspects of the British policy towards the Sikhs have been clear and consistent, namely, their comparative political suppression as evidenced in the Minto-Morley (1909) and Montague-Chelmsford Reforms (1919) and the Sikh ideological erosion by a studied patronage of Hinduised *Mahants* and *Pujaris* and control of their shrines through Government nominated Managers. The Ghadr Rebellion under the Presidentship of Sohan Singh Bhakna and the leadership of religiously Ghadrite Babas and the martyrdoms of Kartar Singh Sarabha and his associates had politically inflamed the Sikhs in Punjab. Extremely painful was the fact that the Government had managed to have disowned and declared persons of the religious eminence of Baba Wasakha Singh and Bhai Randhir Singh of the Ghadr Movement as non-Sikhs by a Sarbrah (custodian appointed by the Government) of the Golden Temple. Because of the Ghadr Rebellion, suppression of the Sikhs continued to be severe during the War. These events, however, made it evident that a political struggle with the British with the dual objective of political freedom and removal of Government control over Sikh Gurdwaras after War would become inevitable. It was clear that more than any other area in the country, the Sikhs in Punjab were ready for a confrontation with the British.

We have already recorded that Sikh religious ethos is both the foundation and the strength of their urge and aspiration for socio-political liberty. The Sikh shrines, particularly the Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, continue since the times of the Gurus to be the fount of Sikh power and inspiration.

Under the leadership of the Akalis, the Sikhs came into an open clash with the Government, first for the liberation of their shrines and then for the liberation of their motherland. The struggle for the liberation of their shrines has been given the appellation Third Sikh War. The two Anglo-Sikh Wars had

already been fought in the middle of the last century. In the Third Sikh War the stakes were the freedom of their Gurdwaras and their religion. It was fought on the basis of and strength of their religious identity and institutions. For the Sikh the freedom of his religion and the freedom of his motherland are synonymous. This is not a recent or a post-facto interpretation of Sikh religion. We record below the actual understanding of a contemporary who partook in the Sikh struggle. Sardul Singh Caveeshar writes, "A Sikh wants to fight his country's battles from the vantage ground of his religion. Being of religious trend of mind, he finds everything subordinate to his *Dharma*; politics is nothing for him but a promising child of religion. A Sikh has not yet developed that fine sense of doubtful value that divides life into water-tight compartments and makes of religion in the West something different from one's social and political life. For the Sikh politics and religion are one. He wants the freedom of his religion, he wants the freedom of his country, but he knows that he cannot have one without the other. If religion is safe, he is sure to get back, soon or late, the freedom of the country. In fact he regards religion as the strong post, from which one should start to get back the lost liberty, as, in his opinion, the religious spirit, alone can keep the freedom of a country safe when once that has been won."<sup>159</sup>

Still among scholars who talk of the British promotion of the Khalsa identity, there is a clear lack of understanding of the Sikh ideology, the realities of the situation, Sikh history and the general historical perspective. As already explained the Sikh ideology laid down by Guru Nanak and the Guru Granth involves a combination of the spiritual and the empirical elements of life. The history of Islam and Judaism that make similar ideological combination furnishes very helpful analogies. It is, therefore, sheer misinterpretation, misrepresentation or misunderstanding of the Sikh ideology to talk of two Sikh identities namely the Khalsa and the Nanakpanthis. Scholars drawn from pacifist or dichotomous religious systems, involving divorce between religious and empirical lives and recommending *Sanyas* on the

one hand and *Varna Ashram Dharma* on the other hand, not only misunderstand the unity of the Sikh doctrine but tend sometimes to measure the Sikh ideology and history by the standards of their own religions. Often such basically conditioned vision is inclined not to take an objective or over-all view. We have made it very clear how Guru Gobind Singh's creation of the Khalsa was the epitome of Guru Nanak's mission and how Khalsa and Nanakpanthis were synonymous terms and were taken and treated as such by the Muslim rulers, their contemporaries or persecutors.

It is also important that the first coin struck by Banda Singh Bahadur in 1715 clearly recognises his victory to be due to the grace of the sword of Guru Nanak. Similarly the coin of Ranjit Singh does not mention any particular person or king except Guru Nanak as the true emperor of both the worlds, spiritual and empirical. Contemporary Mufti-Ali-ud-Din, author of 'Ibrat Nama', makes a significant statement about Sikh identity of the first half of the nineteenth century. He refers to "the Sikhs as belonging to a class highly conscious of the need of shaking off meaningless rituals that the Brahmins had fostered on the Hindu society.....They observed no formalities in the matter of dress and social intercourse also. *Ram-Ram* and *Salam* had given place to *Waheguru Ji ki Fateh*. They had also done away with the Brahmanic practice of reading the Vedas and the Shastras and the Purans and recited only Guru's Bani. The morning prayer consisted of the recitation of the Japji and the Sukhmani. They were particularly careful of their personal cleanliness and purity. A regular daily bath before offering prayers was considered essential but there were sometimes deviations and those who preferred to wash their mouth, hands and feet alone were permitted to do so and the practice was known as *panjishnana*. *Ardas* was an indispensable and prominent feature of their prayers. It was through *Ardas* that the Sikhs solicited help from the Almighty for the efficient performance of their daily life and duties."<sup>163</sup>

The Sikh identity was founded by Guru Nanak, it was nurtured by the subsequent Gurus. When mature, the final seal

in the form of the *Amrit* ceremony was put on it by the Tenth Master. The Sikh Gurus themselves have been emphasising the unity of the Sikh doctrine. This is evidenced by the use of word 'Nanak' in every hymn of the Gurus in the Guru Granth. Thus, ideologically, scripturally, traditionally and in the eyes of the community and its opponents, there was only one identity, namely, the followers of the Gurus. The history of the struggle and persecution in the 18th century and the way the companions of Banda got beheaded at Delhi makes for singularity of identity and not for its plurality. Identities are built by the ideology, motivation, the blood of the martyrs, tradition, suffering and sacrifice and not by the juxtaposition of material facts or by verbal argumentation. Therefore, the two components that constitute Sikh identity, namely, Sikh ideology and the Sikh history during the time of Gurus and the periods of their structuring and have to be taken into view and not just ignored. That is why the Singh Sabha leadership used Gurbani and the Sikh history, especially the armed resistance to the Mughals as a rallying symbol for the Sikh struggle.

The second factor is the reality of the situation in the post-annexation (1849) period. The Khalsa Army, its strength and power were extremely conscious of the Sikh capacity for resurgence and they sought to ensure in every manner, as indicated earlier, to see that there was no political uprising in the State. After the 1857 experience they were doubly conscious and particularly vigilant to take all measures against any sign of political unrest or uprising. This is clear from the known tyrannical manner in which the minor Namdhari uprising was dealt with. As we have noted the British allowed, under the protection of their wings, free play to the Christian missionaries to attack the identity and ideology of the Sikh religion, its history and institutions. These missions were located in the heart of Sikh areas like Batala. The purpose and work of these missions are well known. The journalistic work of McLeod, who has for long years been a functionary of the Batala Christian Centre, can be taken to be



typically representative and revealing of the aims and objectives of such centres. Further, in order to destroy the very roots of Sikhism, the British gave charge of Sikh shrines to Hinduised Managers, Mahants or Pujaris, who did their best to suppress Sikh practices and tradition and instead to introduce Hindu ways and customs. For example, whereas Jassa Singh, the head of Sikh leadership, when he struck the coin after his victory of Lahore in 1761, felt no stigma in calling himself a Kalal, a low Shudra in the Hindu caste hierarchy, the Mahants and Pujaris introduced the practice that Mazhabi Sikhs would not be given *Parshad* at Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, even though Mazhabi Sikhs formed a part of Ranjit Singh's army. In short, had Jassa Singh been alive in the British period, he would have been debarred from being regarded as a Sikh to be given *Parshad* at the Darbar Sahib, Amritsar.

This was the state of affairs after the annexation which the leaders of the Singh Sabha had to battle against. Therefore, they decided, and very wisely, that it would be suicidal to fight on two fronts, namely, the political front and the socio-religious front. Here it is necessary to mention that the first step the Sikhs took after they had revived the religious understanding, cohesion and consciousness of the community and dispelled its sense and shock of the loss of empire, was to free the Gurdwaras from the *Mahants* and *Pujaris*. And it is well known that the agitation which was only directed against these private priests (*Mahants* and *Pujaris*) involved the Sikhs in confrontation with the Government which was really the power behind them and was interested in their continuance as the instruments of erosion of the religious base, the real strength of the community. Thus, the realities of the situation were such that if the Sikhs had tried to fight on both the fronts, failure would have been inevitable. It speaks volumes for their wisdom that they first strengthened their ideological understanding and foundation. And in this they succeeded to a large extent.

Thirdly, these scholars also ignore the general historical

perspective. For example, we refer here to the period of Jewish history for centuries after A.D. 70, when consequent to the fall of Jerusalem and the total annihilation of the political elite and the Temple by the Romans, started the intensive work of religious reconstruction. These religious leaders represented the community both in the religious and political spheres. Historian, Cecil Roth, calls the work and time of these scholars and Rabbis 'The Rule of the Wisest'. Ideologically, Judaism too combines the spiritual life with the empirical life of man. After A.D. 70 it was socio-politically a very lean period of Jewish history. It was a time when "Jerusalem, and the Temple, lay in ruins, and their rebuilding was forbidden.....It is true that the people as a whole sat in mourning for those who had fallen in the War, and for the glory that was gone from Israel.....The spokesman of the Jewish people had hitherto been the rulers of the house of Herod; but the last male representative of that family Herod Agrippa II, was estranged from his people, and had not much longer to live. The High Priest had been hardly less prominent, but with the destruction of the Temple, the High Priesthood itself had come to an end. But, even, before the fall of Jerusalem, there had been a category which enjoyed almost equal, if not superior consideration. The Rabbis-the scholars who expounded the Holy Writ-had always been looked up to by the people with reverence. Now, there was no one else to revere. It happened that, before Jerusalem fell, one of the outstanding scholars of his generation, Johanan ben Zakkai, had managed to escape from the city - according to legend, in a coffin borne by his disciples. Titus had permitted him to settle in the township of Jabneh (Jamnia), on the coast near Jaffa, used as a concentration camp, where he opened a school for the study and exposition of the traditional lore. The most eminent of contemporary scholars gathered around him there. The Sanhedrin, formerly the highest Council of State, became reconstituted from members chosen for their erudition rather than for political influence or wealth. During the subsequent long period it is this syndrome constituted of scholarly persons that steered the Jewish people to safety

over a period of three and a half centuries. With this scholarly group, its president or Nasi slowly acquired semi-official status and in due course came to be recognised as the representative of the Jewish people in its relations with the Roman authorities. With the fall of Temple, the Sadducees, who were the religious heads and whose existence was bound up with the essential Temple worship lost their separate identity or influence. The Pharisee scholars were left masters of the field. These perons developed the educational system and became the centres of local life every where. These scholars even went on missions to Rome discharging duties pertaining to political matters as well. In A.D. 115 the work of reconstruction was interrupted by a terrible catastrophe. The reason was a political revolt which was put down with an excess of cruelty and bloodshed. Another insurrection took place in A.D. 82. This too was mercilessly suppressed followed by intense religious persecution. A harrow was drawn over the site of Jerusalem, and a new city erected, under the name Aelia Capitolina, into which no Jew was allowed to set foot save once a year, when they were suffered to 'buy their tears' at the Temple site."<sup>161</sup>

The lessons of this period of Jewish history are too obvious to be ignored, by any perceptive historian. When a community suffers political defeat, respite for reconstruction is essential; and during this period the fruitful work has to be a stress on ideology, tradition and the rebuilding of morale and the personality of the community. It involves fight only on one front, namely the religious, the socio-cultural and the educational. Emotional or sporadic political revolts during such a lean period are suicidal and become catastrophic and may put the clock of reconstruction back. That is why Roth calls this period of reconstruction by the scholars, Rabbis and others as the "Rule of the Wisest". No historian dubs these Jewish religious scholars as stooges or loyalists of the Romans or creation of Roman rulers; nor does any historian ignore centuries of earlier Jewish history and calls the Jewish cohesion and identity revived by these scholars the work or creation at the instance of the Roman

masters.

Like the efforts of the Jewish Rabbis and scholars, the work of Singh Sabha scholars is so strikingly reconstructive of the life of the Sikh community that it would be sheer prejudice and distortion to call them the tools or creation of the British Masters. Any course of revival, political or military, other than the one taken by Singh Sabhaites would have been suicidal. Politically and militarily, the British were too strong to be taken on directly. Just as the catastrophic result of the two Jewish rebellions crushed by the Romans after the fall of the Temple and Jerusalem, we are well aware of the dismal fate of the sporadic Kuka uprising and the unorganised plans of the Sandhawalia group that were speedily destroyed with a heavy hand. The British power in India then was too well entrenched and alert to be shaken by such feeble bites. Considering the work and achievements of the Singh Sabha and the Akali Movements, from 1873 onwards, it is evident that the Singh Sabhaites and the later Sikh leaders had been politically more wise, alert and conscious than the urban leaders of the Congress like Gokhale and Tilak. In fact, the Congress leaders, it is well known, later only made use of the Sikh struggle, which in its consistency and mass base had taken a clear lead over the subsequent Congress movement. This is also evident from the fact that the Ghadrites and other heroes of the struggle whom these leaders had condemned were later accepted as the martyrs of the Indian freedom movement. And yet no one doubts the Congress leaders as the creation of the British.

Our statement about the Sikh ideology and the entire narration of events from the annexation of Punjab to the start of the Third Sikh War, the Gurdwara Reform Movement, makes a number of issues extremely explicit. The Sikh World view is different from the systems of dichotomous, pacifist, or salvation religions. The Gurus embodied their thesis in the Guru Granth and structured the Sikh Panth and its institutions during a period of over two hundred years. The creation of the Khalsa by the Tenth Master and its struggle during the eighteenth century is

a part of its glorious tradition and its history. We have recounted that after annexation two historical forces were working with fixed directions and objectives. The British, as explained, were clear about their political interests and in a studied manner used all means to serve them. For obvious reasons, one of their aims was to erode the religious base of the Sikhs, which gave them their power and vigour. They were fully aware of the potential of their erstwhile foes, and while they were keen to divert their energies to other ends, they were equally careful to ensure that the Sikhs were neither unnecessarily provoked nor allowed to regenerate or develop their socio-political strength.

Our analysis shows that the objectives which the British government, on the one hand, and the Singh Sabhaites, on the other hand, continued to pursue were clearly divergent. This made an ultimate clash between them inevitable. It also explains why the Sikh mass struggle for liberation started much earlier than such an urge in the rest of the country. But the scholars who assume a community of interests and objectives between the British and the Sikhs simply fail to suggest, much less explain why the clash and the Third Sikh War took place and why it happened in Punjab much earlier than elsewhere.

On the other hand, the Singh Sabhaites knew full well that their only source of inspiration, regeneration and strength was to draw upon their religion, tradition and history. As it is, the course they were to traverse, the lines on which they were to work and the institutions which were to revive, stood clearly defined and chalked out for them in the Guru Granth and their history. The wisdom of the Singh Sabha leaders lies in their clear understanding of their past and the situation they were to face. While they never wavered from the ideals and objectives that had been laid down for them, they, according to the needs of the times, limited their efforts to the task of regeneration and revival of the spirit of the community, without directing initially its struggle to the political front. We have also seen that having reconstructed and secured their socio-religious base, slowly the Singh Sabhaites started pursuing their political objectives.

It is not an accident or just a coincidence that the first tangible rebellion against the British which was mass based took place in Punjab. It is significant that it happened in the later part of the Singh Sabha period and at a time when in the rest of India there were hardly any signs of any such uprising or even a preparation for it. In fact, the Indian leaders and the politically conscious elite were openly cooperating with the British war effort in those times. Equally contrasted was the reaction of the Sikhs in the Punjab to the Rowlatt Act and similar reaction in the rest of India. The agitation against the Rowlatt Act, culminating in the Jallian-wala Bagh massacre and the subsequent imposition of Martial law and the Akali struggle for the liberation of their shrines were the two off-shoots of the religious base that had been securely revived by the Singh Sabha. It is a part of history that between 1919 and 1925 no mass based political struggle was conducted outside Punjab.

It is just idle to suggest that any religious identity, or the Sikh religious identity that had been created by an ideology, new institutions, and a four-hundred-year tradition of martyrdom and unparalleled sacrifices, could be demolished by the British rulers, as they wished to do, through the *Mahants*; or that such a vigorous identity could be created by the British, as some writers suggest. Religious ideologies or identities cannot be created either by wishful thinking or by fiat of the rulers. The fate of Din-i-Illahi of Akbar, an Indian Emperor, seeking to change the established tradition and religions is well-known.

The conclusion of our analysis is that the role of Singh Sabha and the related history of Punjab in the post-annexation period can be understood only in its religious, ideological and historical perspective, artificially constructed rationale simply fails to explain the very significant and stormy concentration of events that took place in the State in the half century following 1873 A.D. The glorious role of the Sikhs in the eighteenth century is undoubted. Similar is the outstanding contribution of the community to the Indian struggle for Independence. Unless the appreciation furnished in this paper is accepted, we create a hiatus in Sikh history which no superficial explanation can account for.

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